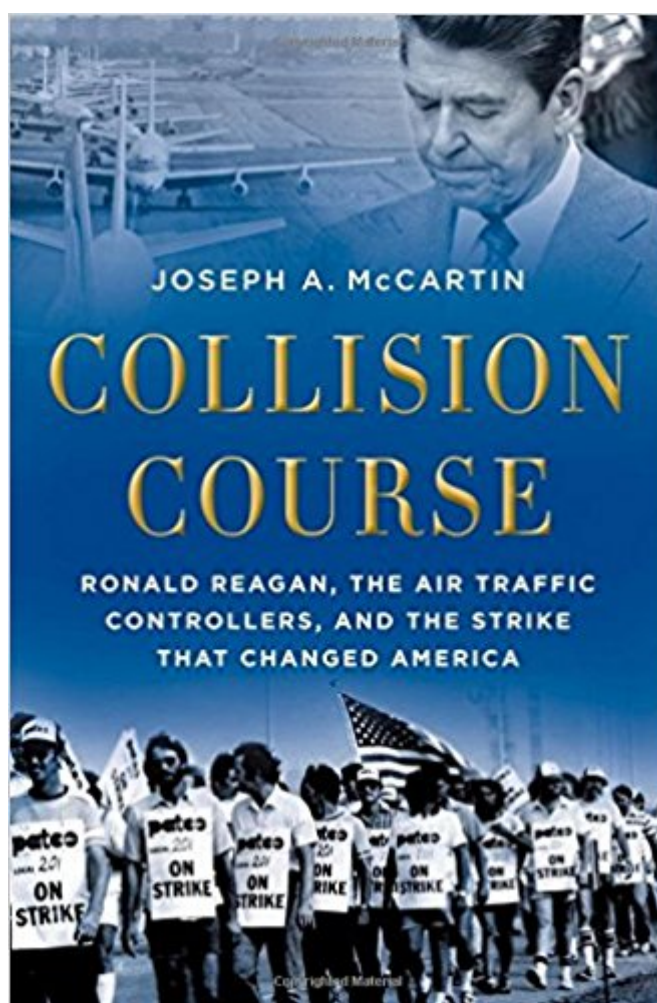


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Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, The Air Traffic Controllers, And The Strike That Changed America



Synopsis

In August 1981, the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) called an illegal strike. The new president, Ronald Reagan, fired the strikers, establishing a reputation for both decisiveness and hostility to organized labor. As Joseph A. McCartin writes, the strike was the culmination of two decades of escalating conflict between controllers and the government that stemmed from the high-pressure nature of the job and the controllers' inability to negotiate with their employer over vital issues. PATCO's fall not only ushered in a long period of labor decline; it also served as a harbinger of the campaign against public sector unions that now roils American politics. Now available in paperback, *Collision Course* sets the strike within a vivid panorama of the rise of the world's busiest air-traffic control system. It begins with an arresting account of the 1960 midair collision over New York that cost 134 lives and exposed the weaknesses of an overburdened system. Through the stories of controllers like Mike Rock and Jack Maher, who were galvanized into action by that disaster and went on to found PATCO, it describes the efforts of those who sought to make the airways safer and fought to win a secure place in the American middle class. It climaxes with the story of Reagan and the controllers, who surprisingly endorsed the Republican on the promise that he would address their grievances. That brief, fateful alliance triggered devastating miscalculations that changed America, forging patterns that still govern the nation's labor politics. Written with an eye for detail and a grasp of the vast consequences of the PATCO conflict for both air travel and America's working class, *Collision Course* is a stunning achievement.

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Customer Reviews

"Simply one of the best-written labor histories I have ever read." -Working USA: The Journal of Labor and Society "Mr. McCartin deals with policy but also with personalities, and the book is better for it. For anyone at all interested in labor or business history, I recommend it. " --The New York Times "[C]onvincing...draws a vivid picture of a culture and how, as much as the realities an organization faces, that culture can determine the group's behavior." --The Philadelphia Inquirer "[McCartin] patiently lays out the full background and aftermath of the PATCO tragedy in Collision Course, an absorbing, detailed and shrewdly observed chronicle of the strike and PATCO's unlikely rise and fall." --The Nation "The definitive account of the PATCO strike...Collision Course's treatment of worker and political power should help inform trade unions' strategies today, and perhaps prompt discussion of how to revitalize the greatest source of worker power: the strike." --In These Times "The air traffic controllers' strike in August 1981 was a defining moment for the Reagan presidency and the American labor movement. By firing the air traffic controllers, and successfully replacing them, Reagan heralded the end of a political era when labor unions - and the workers they represented - were an integral part of the American social contract. Joseph McCartin tells the story in gripping detail. It's must reading for anyone interested in the recent history of American politics and labor relations." --John B. Judis, author of The Folly of Empire "The signal event in the evisceration of the American middle class was Ronald Reagan's breaking the air traffic controllers' strike in 1981. In Collision Course, Joe McCartin brilliantly and compellingly tells this tragic tale, and situates it in the broader narrative of middle-class America's long and sickening decline." --Harold Meyerson, Editor-at-Large of The American Prospect and op-ed columnist for The Washington Post "In an age of obscurantist academic historical writing, Collision Course stands out as a model of accessible and relevant scholarship." --National Review "The Air Traffic Controllers strike of 1981 was one of the most important struggles in American history, and by breaking the union, Ronald Reagan dealt a blow to organized labor from which it has still not recovered. If you care about the labor movement, you need to read Collision Course and even if you don't, you'll be transfixed by the drama of McCartin's story-telling." --E.J. Dionne, syndicated columnist and author of Why Americans Hate Politics "[a] wonderfully good book... In this admirable account of President Ronald Reagan's destruction of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) in 1981-1982, McCartin shows not merely where that destruction fits into a long narrative of the decline of organized labor in the United States but also how tensions between controllers and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) might have been resolved differently." --Journal of American History "McCartin tells the story of PATCO before its inception to years after the conclusion of the

strike, a fascinating story with many twists and turns." --Contemporary Sociology

Joseph A. McCartin is Professor of History at Georgetown University and Director of the Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor.

Anyone who remembers 1981 remembers the day the air traffic controllers went out on strike. President Reagan ordered them to report back to work within 48 hours or else. Those who didn't (only 10% of those striking returned to work) were fired. In *Collision Course*, labor historian Joseph McCartin has written an account of the formation of PATCO (the Professional Air Traffic Controllers' Organization), the strike, and what happened after Reagan fired the controllers. *Collision Course* is no dull labor history. It's told almost like a thriller. McCartin refers early in the book to Arthur Hailey's novel *À Airport*. I think he may have been inspired by Hailey to keep it punchy, because even though you know how the PATCO story ends, it's still quite exciting to read about the events leading up to the inevitable clash of union and employer. McCartin tells many sides to the story that I wasn't aware of at the time. Reagan's decision to act tough had just as much to do with foreign policy as it did with labor relations. He was dealing with the Soviets and needed to appear decisive and ruthless. McCartin also tells how the controller population was overwhelmingly male, white, and ex-military. The chapters on how the black controllers and the women controllers created ways to succeed despite the institutional prejudice they faced is actually quite inspiring. It's possible that the tendency for the white men of PATCO to see things from a narrow point of view was part of their downfall. PATCO dismissed the concerns of the few blacks and women among their numbers, and they also failed to consider how their increasing demands might appear to the American taxpayers. As gripping as the story is, what does it have to do with us today? Lots, according to McCartin, and he makes a convincing case. Unions were reluctant for decades after the PATCO strike to push back against a steady loss of benefits and wages, because employers figured if the president could break a strike, they could too. Even in 2011, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker invoked Reagan's memory to justify his successful bill to eliminate bargaining rights for public workers. Never mind that Reagan acknowledged PATCO's right to bargain and only drew the line at the illegal strike. After the mass firing, unions became less and less popular, and the balance of power between employer and employee tilted heavily in favor of the employer. "They can't fire all of us." What had been a rallying cry for the PATCO controllers before the strike became gallows humor to post-PATCO workers, an ironic reminder that yes, they can fire all of us.

This excellent book exemplifies "a day in the life" of those of us who were involved in this extraordinary attempt (PATCO strike) to gain some long-overdue validation and vindication for past oversights of our profession by the Federal government.. Unfortunately, as beautifully detailed in Mr. McCartins writing, things don't always work out as planned.. Kind of like getting married.. and then, getting divorced.. Stuff Happens.. Life goes on.. There are many stories out there of "life after PATCO 1981". I became an FAA controller in Jan. 1975.. I was 29 years old in Aug. 1981.. I have had many "lives" since that fateful day. Now, at age 63, I am still dealing with the fallout from that excellent adventure.. But, that's OK.. This book needs to be read by every person involved with aviation. It may help explain why, in this day and age, some of you are not making the wages that you feel you deserve.. It all goes back to this strike in 1981.. The ripple effect on our industry which continues even 33 years after the fact.. Again, Mr. McCartin: thanks for the awesome book and for the long-forgotten memories of a day in the life (my life)..

Heavily researched and very well-written, but dry. Excellent labor relations study. Laborious to almost too heavy on some of the 1970's events. Don't take this lightly as a quick read; but it's excellent in shedding insight into what happened with PATCO. Funny how politics makes groups of people do things they would normally avoid as single individuals. I couldn't understand why blue-collar workers would risk losing a job that paid such a high wage, even under stressful and crappy management. It was 1981 and at the end of the 70's when all that employment uncertainty and inflation made everyone fear for their jobs. This book, written by a seemingly impartial observer, presents the best even-handed view available. Thank you for illuminating the strike and contract negotiations in such detail. These negotiation stances, both union and government, are fine examples of strategy games. The anthropology and historical detail here are exemplary. Personalities do matter, but no one person is to blame or praise for 1981. Group thinking is quite apparent on both sides.

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